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The Pioneers: Reflections of America's Anxiety about Frontier Expansion

James Cooper's[1] *The Pioneers*[2] (1823) is the first book of a series of five novels that are known collectively as *The Leatherstocking Tales*. According to D.H. Lawrence, these novels represent "the true myth of America" (1977: 60). Following Lawrence's lead, Leslie A. Fiedler pronounces Cooper "the most mythopoetically gifted of all the American writers" (1976: 121). Indeed, James Franklin Beard (1960) declares that "No other imaginative writer had so successfully identified himself, in love and in anger, with the multitudinous problems besetting the young Republic" as Cooper (I: xviii).

Although Fiedler's claim that Cooper had written America's archetypal national myth of progress may, on some level, be true, his assertion minimizes the problem of environmental destruction upon which America's "progress" was based. Some critics, such as E. Arthur Robinson, see *The Pioneers* as a broad treatise on conservation; others, like Hugh C. MacDougall**,** see James Fenimore Cooper as one of three key 19th century figures[3] who dared broach the topic of environmental protection in their respective works long before it became fashionable. However, Willis points out that Cooper was only "restarting the debate," echoing concerns about the state of the environment present from the colonial period (2011: 4–5). This paper explores one thread in the complex tapestry of the narrative; how Cooper utilizes his familiar didactic style to

[1] Fenimore wasn't added to Cooper's name until 1826.

[2] James Fenimore Cooper, Lance Schachterle and Kenneth M. Andersen, Jr., eds. *The Pioneers or the Sources of the Susquehanna; A Descriptive Tale*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1980. Cooper Edition. Unless otherwise noted, subsequent page references are to this edition and cited parenthetically.

[3] Along with Thomas Cole and William Cullen Bryant.

debate the issue of who is better suited to check the rapacity of environmental destruction that occurred during the expansion of the American frontier.

The Pioneers, which was Cooper's third publication, enjoyed strong initial success. It was brought forth amid the ambient glow of his hugely successful Revolutionary War tale, *The Spy*. The first edition of *The Pioneers* sold an unprecedented 3,500 copies on the morning of publication (Verhoeven 1993: 11). In the Introduction to the 1832 edition of *The Pioneers*, Cooper tells his audience that the reader who takes the trouble to peruse the text will be happy to know "how much of its contents is literal fact" (6). He explains that it was "mine own humour that suggested this tale; but it is a humour that is deeply connected with feeling"; many of the characters "were so familiar to his [my] own youth" (4, 6). These statements, when combined with the carefully ordered pastoral presentation of Templeton, itself an echo of Judge William Cooper's account of the founding of Otsego (later to be renamed Cooperstown) at the opening of the text, lend credence to teleological arguments made by the mythical interpretation school. Cooper writes:

> . . . It is among these hills that the Delaware takes its rise; and flowing from the limpid lakes and thousand springs of this region, the numerous sources of the Susquehanna meander through the valleys, until, uniting their streams, they form one of the proudest rivers of the United States. The vales are narrow, rich, and cultivated; with a stream uniformly winding through each. Beautiful and thriving villages are found interspersed along the margins of the small lakes, or situated at those points of the streams which are favourable to manufacturing; and neat and comfortable farms, with every indication of wealth about them, are scattered profusely through the vales, and even to the mountain tops. Roads diverge in every direction, from the even and graceful bottoms of the valleys, to the most rugged and intricate passes of the hills. Academies, and minor edifices of learning, meet the eye of the stranger, at every few miles, as he winds his way through this uneven territory; and places for the worship of God, abound with that frequency which characterizes a moral and reflecting people, and with the variety of exterior and canonical government which flows from the unfettered liberty of conscience. In short, the whole district is hourly exhibiting how much can be done, in even a rugged country, and with a severe climate, under the dominion of mild laws, and where every man feels a direct interest in the prosperity of a commonwealth, of which he knows himself to form a part . . . Only forty years have passed since this territory was a wilderness. (15–6)

The implicit understanding in the above is that looking from present-day 1823, back some forty years to the early 1780s, America since the Revolutionary War, even in its remote wilderness areas, has progressed toward the

Republican ideal as expressed in the *Constitution*. J. Hector St. John De Crèvecoeur who was neither an American nor a farmer, but rather a French aristocrat, earnestly praised America as an agrarian paradise in his well known series, *Letters from an American Farmer*. In the third letter, Crèvecoeur states, "By the literal account hereunto annexed, you will easily be made acquainted with the happy effects which constantly flow, in this country, from sobriety and industry, when united with good land and freedom" (192.4/472). He helped to create a positive impression of the colonies for Europe in the post-war period as a stable and prosperous agrarian based civilization. Crèvecoeur wrote that land ownership "established all our rights; on it is founded our rank, our freedom, our power as citizens, our importance as inhabitants of such a district" (82.0/472).

According to Kathryn VanSpanckeren, Crèvecoeur inspired Thomas Jefferson's agrarian ideal, which was to become the bedrock upon which the new Republic was to stand (n. pag.). Jefferson, writing to John Adams at Monticello, on October 28, 1812, argues that there is a natural aristocracy in America, which is formed on the basis of virtue, talents, and merit (Jefferson: n. pag.). Cooper shared many of Jefferson's and Crèvecoeur's political beliefs, particularly with regard to property ownership as the foundation of a stable republican form of government.

In *The Pioneers*, he embodies Marmaduke Temple as a representation of these beliefs. Temple is a charismatic, larger than life character that was allegedly inspired by Cooper's father, Judge William Cooper. He owns vast holdings in Templeton and controls substantially more land in the area surrounding it. Throughout *The Pioneers*, Temple expresses concern and regret at the wasteful and exploitative ways that local settlers attend to the natural resources, especially to the maple trees. Although eligible to claim the status of aristocrat by virtue of his wealth, it is not this basis upon which his status as natural aristocrat rests; rather, it is his particular characteristic of mind that affords Temple this honor:

> The mind of Judge Temple, at all times comprehensive, had received from his peculiar occupations a bias to look far into futurity, in his speculations on the improvements that posterity were to make in his lands. To his eye, where others saw nothing but a wilderness, towns, manufactories, bridges, canals, mines, and all the other resources of an old country were constantly presenting themselves, though his good sense suppressed, in some degree, the exhibition of these expectations. (321)

Temple's stature only increases when, "according to the custom of the new settlements, [he had] been selected to fill its highest judicial station" (37).

Judge Temple and his cousin Richard (Dickon) Jones are linked by birth in social status. Judge Temple is the older who exemplifies the natural aristocracy referred to in Jefferson's theory of aristocracy (n. pag.). Jones, born two days later, represents the "artificial aristocracy founded on wealth and birth, [**but**] without either virtue or talents," which both Cooper and Jefferson feared would unravel the tenuous ties binding the new nation together (Jefferson: n. pag.). When Jones suggests that he and Judge Temple share much in common, Temple retorts, "to my eyes, we seem to differ so materially, and so often" (316). Where Judge Temple is suitably aware of the example his actions set within the community, Jones is both oblivious and uncaring of his example. Temple soundly chastises Jones for his choice of firewood burning upon the Christmas hearth saying:

> How often have I forbidden the use of the sugar maple in my dwelling! The sight of that sap, as it exudes with the heat, is painful to me, Richard. Really, it behooves the owner of woods so extensive as mine, to be cautious what example he sets his people, who are already felling the forests as if no end could be found to their treasures, nor any limits to their extent. If we go on in this way, twenty years hence we shall want fuel. (105)

Jones responds derisively to the absurd belief that the community could "want" for fuel, saying, "Why, you might as well predict that the fish will die for the want of water in the lake" as to think that there will be a lack of trees (105). A bit later, during the same scene, Judge Temple addresses his comments to one of his guests; however, in this conversation the reader is allowed to view a fleeting glimpse of an alternative motive for Temple, one perhaps that is less concerned with conservation of the environment than it is with the preservation of capital.

> The wastefulness of the settlers with the noble trees of this country is shocking, Monsieur Le Quoi, as doubt less you have noticed. I have seen a man fell a pine, when he has been in want of fencing stuff, and roll his first cuts into the gap, where he left it to rot, though its top would have made rails enough to answer his purpose, and its butt would have sold in the Philadelphia market for twenty dollars. (108)

Jones facetiously interjects that he would like to know exactly how a man was supposed to get the logs to Philadelphia to sell, "by put[ting] them in his pocket . . . as you would a handful of chestnuts, or a bunch of chicker-berries" (108)?

The comic impossibility of such an act combined with his pronouncement that, "Poh! poh! Cousin 'Duke,' there are trees enough for us all, and some to spare" both undermines and deflects the emotional impact of Judge Temple's environmental defense (109).

In another exchange, Jones has led Temple and his party of family and friends up the mountainside so Temple can show his daughter the beautiful view of Templeton. As the Judge rides through the maple woods, he notices "a deep and careless incision had been made into each [maple] tree" he passes (224). The Judge confides to his Cousin that:

> I hope to live to see the day when farms and plantations shall be devoted to this branch of business [sugaring]. Little is known concerning the properties of **the tree itself, the source of all this wealth**; how much it may be improved by cultivation, by the use of the hoe and plough (222).

Predictably, Jones's response is to suggest that the Judge has gone mad. He goes further and suggests, "my dear cousin, hear reason, and leave the management of the sugar-bush to me" (222). However, the Judge knows all too well that if the sugar-bush is left to the management of Jones, the allure of immediate personal profit would over-ride the long-term needs of the community.

As the scene unfolds, the reader can "hear" a deep and powerful voice singing. Upon arrival at the place from whence the voice is emanating, Judge Temple discovers Billy Kirby tending camp, where he is sugaring on "sheares" (sic) with fellow Yankee Jared Ransom (229). Temple comments aloud, as he strolls among the trees, that "it grieves me to witness the extravagance that pervades this country." He then implores Billy to "remember that they [the maple trees] are the growth of centuries, and when once gone, none living will see their loss remedied" (228). Kirby looks at Temple and reiterates Jones's earlier argument against the Judge's private desire to see plantations of maple trees, "It seems to me, if there's a plenty of any thing (sic) in this mountaynous (sic) country, it's the trees" (229).

Later in the scene Richard, after belittling the size of the sugar loaves produced in Judge Temple's own sugar camp offers that **if he** "owned a hundred, or, for that matter, two hundred thousand acres of land, as you do" **he** would build a community sugar house and "invite learned men to an investigation of the subject [of maple sugar production]" (221). At this point, Jones openly challenges the Judge's ability to run his business affairs in the most efficient manner, saying that while Temple makes sugar, is it "the best possible sugar"**?** (222).

A maple grove is an appropriate setting for Cooper to dramatize the relative merits of Jefferson's theory of aristocracy. The sugar maple tree is common

in New England and New York State, but rare in other areas of the world. Cooper describes a grove that was filled with tall straight trees "spreading their branches in stately pride . . . [which] formed the columns" of a "mighty temple" dome – their "tops composing the capitals and the heavens the arch" (224). Cooper evokes a virtuous republican government, the Providential founding of America, and religious freedom, all in one image. The measured response of Judge Temple, "with a gravity in his air," is meant to demonstrate the reasoned authority and tolerance that natural aristocracy must use when dealing with those who seek to challenge its authority (222). To indicate the strength of the rising power of artificial aristocracy in New York State politics at this time, Cooper juxtaposes Temple's concern and regret of the wasteful and exploitative ways that local settlers attend to the natural resources, especially to the maple trees, against Jones's agenda, which is founded upon "agrarian and plundering enterprises" (Jefferson n. pag.). Yet, if this juxtaposition is meant to reassure the public that the natural aristocracy will protect them, Cooper also indicates that he has doubts about this. Rans points out that throughout *The Pioneers*, Judge Temple "expresses his enlightened rationalism convincingly, but he speaks and rides away" (Rans 1991: 79). Support for these doubts comes along with the discussion "concarning (sic) ashes" that Cooper places immediately after the Judge's chastisement of Kirby's "wounding" of the maple trees (229). The 'ashes' here mentioned are potash, the byproduct of burning hardwood trees during the clearing of fields on the frontier for agricultural production. One can begin to comprehend how rapidly changes in the landscape occurred around Templeton during the winter of 1793 through eyes of Judge Temple's daughter:

> Elizabeth saw many large openings appear in the sides of the mountains during the three succeeding months, where different settlers had, in the language of the country "made their pitch," while the numberless sleighs that passed through the village, loaded with wheat and barrels of potashes, afforded a clear demonstration that all these labors were not undertaken in vain (215).

According to Tench Coxe, between October 1791 and September 1792 New York State was ranked number one in the nation in the production of potash, producing in excess of four thousand seven hundred tons of potash and its derivative, pearl ash (1794: 413). New York outstripped its nearest competitor, Massachusetts by a 2 to 1 margin (*ibid.*). Men like Judge Temple (and Judge Cooper) made their fortune by capitalizing on each stage of that change. Judge Cooper wrote *A Guide in the Wilderness* (1810), aimed at instructing

other land speculators how to duplicate his phenomenal success. In 1791 Judge Cooper writes that where a:

> . . . Pensylvanyman would look Round and say 'I shall starve before I can Clear me a farm in this kind of land' [heavily timbered], but the easternite will say, 'here is a fine chance. I can get immediate Relief from the ashes and whilst I am waiting for the return of my first Crop, the [Maple] Sugar trees will afford me a very seasonable assistance' (Taylor 1995: 94–5).

Temple may not take pleasure in the wholesale destruction of the forests, like his Cousin Richard Jones and Billy Kirby appear to, but he nonetheless profits alongside them from their enthusiastic and systematic destruction following what Stuart Udall once labeled "the myth of superabundance" (54). Yet the myth of superabundance also had a counter myth, the belief that overpopulation was eminently near to destroying all the natural resources necessary to sustain human life. This Malthusian myth had strong support along the urbanized East coast, where people had already experienced firewood shortages and pollution.

From 1795 onward, the anticipation of real want, especially with regard to timber, became a matter that was often written about in the daily press and other non-official publications (Fernow 1902: 374). The level of anxiety within the government can be approximated by the fact that the "federal government, between the years 1799 and 1831, appropriated money for the purchase and passed legislation for the protection of live oak timber" because of concerns that they would not have this necessary material for use in building their warships (Fernow 1902: 370). It is understandable that those who were witnessing the rapid decimation of the forests should sound the alarm to alert government to take care.

Of course, Jefferson believed that the government should be made up of the natural aristocracy who were uniquely blessed with "the most precious gift of nature for the instruction, the trusts, and government of society" (Jefferson: n. pag.). It was inconceivable to him that God would form such men without giving them "virtue and wisdom enough to manage the concerns of the society" (Jefferson: n. pag.). Judge Temple, as a representative of the natural aristocracy, can see the need for conservation. He routinely instructs those around him in the wise management of natural resources, however, as Rans has argued, Temple takes no meaningful action to quell the destructive forces that are represented by Jones and Kirby (78). Rather than accepting responsibility for their inability to rein in the greed epitomized by Jones and Kirby, the natural aristocrats project this failure to control or even mitigate their destructive

behavior on to foreign nations; Temple laments, "So long as the old world is to be convulsed with wars, so long will the harvest of America continue" (229). The implication being that the **Old World** is causing "good men" to take actions in America that they would not otherwise take and it is beyond the control of the natural aristocracy to stop them. Cooper appears to abandon any hope that the natural aristocrats will be able to check the rapaciousness of the artificial aristocrats, subliminally implying that where Jefferson saw an ability to separate of the "aristoi from the pseudo-aristoi, of the wheat from the chaff," as it were, he sees little distinction between the two groups (Jefferson: n. pag.).

Antebellum America's relationship with the frontier, untouched by white men, was an ambivalent one; yet controlling and harnessing the power of the wilderness was key to America's future prosperity. The very cultivation of the wilderness threatened the stability of the social, financial, and political order established before the Revolution. The wilderness was a force unto itself, corrupting good men by allowing them access to land and its natural resources, and by extension, wealth, without the prerequisite social position and education necessary to ensure the appropriate use of either of these resources. Further, the frontier experience hardened men; it tended to create men of a more individualistic nature who were insistent upon egalitarian representation. They were no longer willing to endure frontier hardships and shed their own blood fighting to keep their land out of the hands of foreigners and Indians, only to be controlled by the landed aristocracy. They wanted a voice, an equal voice, in the representative democracy that they had fought in the War to establish.

The inevitable clash between the landed aristocracy and the mass of landless "jobbers" like Billy Kirby is anticipated by the derisive tone used by Richard Jones, which is immediately echoed by Kirby when dismissing Judge Temple's sound recommendations for environmental conservation. It indicates both the **breadth** and the **depth** of disregard, even latent hostility, for the views of the landed gentry within the New York State political system. Kirby, as a landless "jobber," is especially important in the above discussion because he illustrates the popular appeal for universal suffrage in New York State. For Jefferson, to give representative power to the masses would "give them power in order to prevent them from doing mischief, is arming them for it, and increasing instead of remedying the evil" (Jefferson: n. pag.). Cooper shares Jefferson's fear of opening the political process to men much like Kirby who are easily manipulated by Jones, whom Temple views "much like an accompaniment on a piano, a thing that is heard without being attended to" (65). Thus Cooper

suggests that Jefferson's aristoi doomed themselves by failing to attend to the concerns of those around them.

Cooper's success at this time in his career came in part because he was able to mirror in his narratives the multitudinous voices that "spoke" during the early decades of the nineteenth century in American history. He was concerned with the destruction of America's wilderness, but his concern was linked to his broader and deeply held fears of the direction that America was taking politically. Cooper never doubted the primacy of the American democratic ideal, although he did question the wisdom of some political decisions. His unwavering faith in the democratic principles embodied in the Constitution allowed him to express honestly multiple positions with regard to unpopular and sometimes inconvenient truths. He firmly believed that once the American reading public was properly apprised of all the facts about an issue, in this case, the reasoned and forward looking management of nature's bounty by the natural aristocrats, they would, in Jefferson's words, be able to "separate the wheat from the chaff" (Jefferson: n. pag.).

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